

Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan



Salad Days in Your Salad Garden

Like many people, I grew up thinking that salads were little more than clumps of tasteless iceberg lettuce, wedges of flavorless supermarket tomatoes, and an oily dressing reconstituted from dried Italian herbs in a foil envelope. Thankfully, American cuisine has changed, and now most of us can turn to our garden for help in creating exciting salads from homegrown greens, vegetables, herbs — and even flowers!

Yet, while innovative mixings abound, many people still consider lettuce to be the most important ingredient in salads. Unfortunately, lettuce is a cool weather vegetable, which is fine for spring and fall, but the first touch of warm weather soon encourages lettuce to bolt, leaving home gardens and salad bowls without a touch of green. Or does it? The fact is that richly flavored and eye-catching salads can be created with no lettuce at all.

But before exploring the exciting options, let's take one last look at lettuce, if only for sentimental reasons. There are several recognized types of lettuce, which include crisphead, such as our old friend iceberg lettuce, followed by butterhead, leaf, and romaine.

Butterhead lettuces are the most popular varieties in Europe, and feature loose heads, unlike the more compact crispheads. Among butterheads, buttercrunch is one of the most delicious, along with bibb, a tasty cultivar originally from Kentucky, and Boston, another attractive cultivar. In fact, edible gardening guru Rosalind Creasy has compared a container filled with Boston lettuce to "a bouquet of green roses."

Leaf lettuces are more tolerant of warmer temperatures and will provide greens almost until summer. I have actually used scissors to clip leaves of oakleaf lettuce for salads, much like mowing an edible lawn. Other popular varieties include black-seeded simpson, green ice, ruby, and red fire. In addition to providing a longer growing season, leaf lettuces are wonderfully colorful, appearing in light green, red, crimson, and bronze, making them



excellent candidates for use in a colorful knot garden.

Romaine or cos is the last major type of lettuce, although for many its upright leaves are considered the sweetest tasting of all varieties.

Where traditional lettuce leaves off, a whole new world of greens appears, often suitable for summer temperatures, and offering rich and spicy flavors for the palate. Of course, these are "greens" in name only. Many of the selections are dazzling to the eye and can be introduced into formal perennial beds and border plantings.

For example, consider ruby chard, a brilliantly colored plant that can be used much like spinach in a salad or as a bright bedding plant. Mustard greens, green or red in color, can add powerful flavor to a salad of wild greens, such as dandelions. Use sparingly or plan on topping with a tangy or fruit-based vinaigrette. Red cabbage can add color to both garden and salad, along with the deeper greens of kale, spinach and New Zealand spinach, a fleshy, lush variety.

Some greens should be added just a few leaves at a time. Several leaves of sweet basil, for instance, can be ripped into smaller pieces and tossed into your salad bowl to add surprising "flavor pockets." Garden sorrel, or milder tasting French sorrel, is typically used in soups and sauces, but you can perk up your salad by adding a smattering of leaves, although some cooks prefer to blanch the leaves before using.

A long row of chives can create a graceful border planting, topped with white, pink or purple blooms several times throughout the year. They are also wonderful additions to salads, especially where garlic chives are concerned. Simply snip off small pieces as you prepare your salad to add a piquant garlic-onion flavor. Feel free to add the colorful flowers as well!

Salad burnet is a hardy perennial with tangy leaves that can be stripped off the stem by running it between your thumb and index finger, adding a delightful, subtle cucumber flavor year-round. And Pineapple mint, pretty enough in the herb garden, can be tossed in to add a clean, refreshing flavor and a golden green flash of color among the other greens.

Naturally, traditional vegetables can and should be mixed into salads, whether cucumbers, tomatoes, or peppers. But you need not limit your selections to the most common varieties. There are hundreds of tomato varieties to enjoy, if you start plants from seed. Well-stocked garden centers offer a dozen or so heirloom varieties ranging from green grape tomatoes, to cultivars sporting purple and golden fruits, and pineapple or other unique flavors.

Aim for a range of color and flavor with vegetables. Bell peppers are fine, but experiment with the gamut of pepper possibilities — sweet, hot, or chile. Try growing Tuscan peppers, which provide a

medium hot flavor, although these are often best after pickling.

Uncommon selections like red okra stand out in a garden like miniature hibiscus plants, and, after pickling, like pepperoncini, provide an outstanding southern accent to a salad. Mushrooms can be raised from mail-order kits. Tender button mushrooms can take up residence under a kitchen sink, while shiitake can be grown outdoors in inoculated oak logs.

Finally, flowers from the garden add dazzling color to salads. Nasturtium, both flowers and buds, add a peppery flavor, in addition to blooms of red, crimson, saffron, yellow, and cream. In addition, toss in flowers from the entire *Viola* family, especially the petals of violets and Johnny-jump-ups. From your herb collection, add borage flowers, yellow petals of calendula, and marjoram and oregano flowers, just to spice things up.

The most important thing to remember as you plan for the salad days ahead is that you do not need a full-blown garden to grow delicious ingredients. Herbs can be grown in window boxes, fresh tomatoes and greens raised in containers on balconies, or colorful lettuce and herbs mixed into borders, while flowers await picking in hanging baskets.



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